

# Habitat Stewards — *Sowing the Seeds for the Future*

Summer of 2008 was the beginning of a new venture for Habitat Stewards at the Nature Center. The group decided to start a small on-site nursery. The plan was to grow our own supply of native plants for the Nature Center grounds. At one of their weekend enrichments, John Eckhoff, from the California Department of Fish and Game, treated the group to an informative talk. As a specialist on grassland restoration in Southern California, he supplied the Stewards with great information, helpful hints, and grass seeds for their new nursery. A follow-up field trip was taken to Orange Coast River Park in Huntington Beach. Volunteers gathered information from this native plant nursery about starting their own.

With a small area set aside for a Nature Center nursery, volunteers began sowing seeds, donated by John Eckhoff and John Zawacki, for use in an upcoming grassland project. Flats were prepared with moist soil and filled with Purple Needlegrass, Fiddleneck and Tarplant

seeds. The plan was to plant the first set of nursery seedlings in the field across from the “burn zone”, right past the waterfall. What a great area to plant a native grassland! Before any seedlings could be sown, however, the site needed to be cleared—a very laborious process. All of the non-native plants had to be removed and the area covered by mulch to suppress further growth. Drastic measures were taken to quicken the process and add a little excitement. You may have seen Habitat Steward, Tom Fowler wielding a scythe to remove a bulk of thistle. Quite a sight!

To get the process started, four species of grass seedlings purchased from Tree Of Life Nursery were planted at the newly cleared site. Cages were built and placed around the vulnerable plants to protect them from hungry rodents. On March 28, the first sets of seedlings from the nursery were added to the fledgling grassland. The hope is to continue growing a variety of grasses and other plants in the nursery, which will later be planted throughout the

Nature Center. Special thanks to a dedicated group of volunteers for starting and maintaining the nursery and new grassland: **Margaret Brandt, Linda Bryan-Thompson, Tom Fowler, Nancy Hagthorp, Harry Hatanaka, Lynne Horn, Caroline Klund, Kerry Martin, Rick Nolan, Deidra Sanard, Don Scales, Ron Sievers, and JoAnn Smith.**

While the nursery and grassland may have been a large part of their work as of late, Habitat Stewards have also been busy with other grounds maintenance projects. All of the native plant restoration sites have been monitored on a regular basis to promote continued success. Trails and vegetation have been continually sculpted to maintain their integrity and native plants were transplanted to new areas to promote better growth.

These volunteers give their dedication, time and sweat to make the Nature Center a wonderful habitat for humans, plants and wildlife to enjoy. Thank You!

## Springing into New Life – *Beautiful Natives on the Trail*

Who says we don't have four seasons in Southern California? It can't be any of the visitors who frequent the trails at El Dorado Nature Center year 'round. Though the changes we observe are less dramatic than magazine-pictured scenes of crocus blossoms emerging from snowy ground, they do occur here, bringing beautiful banks of flowers and new green growth around every bend in the path.

In your neighborhood, you might notice plants popping up uninvited, and might even call them “weeds.” Many of these are the native plants we value and even nurture at the Nature Center, as they in turn, support insects which are vital to the local food web. Renewed plant growth begins with the fall rainy season, typically from November on. By March or April, our plants, some of which were quite dormant in the hot, dry days of late summer, have fresh leaves and colorful flowers. Seeds which lay inactive despite our dry weather

irrigation, suddenly germinate after the first rains. From the many varieties of flowering perennial and annual plants and shrubs, take time to look for these during your next walk:

**Bush Mallow:** tall, leggy plants with small leaves and many pale mauve flowers along the branches; found in abundance in the garden at the north shore of the South Lake.

**California Poppy:** the State flower; shades of fluorescent orange; ferny foliage; under a foot tall; found on the quarter-mile trail, the meadow area near the end of the two-mile trail, and other places where nature or our hardworking volunteers place the seeds.

**Elegant Clarkia:** bright fuchsia, white, pale pink or purple crinkled petals, flowers along the stems at the top of the plant, which are under three feet tall; planted next to the building, in the gardens of the meadow found at the end of the two-mile trail, among other places.

**Flannel Bush:** large flowering shrub with gold fuzz on the backs of the leaves and showy golden yellow blossoms; the best examples are on the quarter-mile trail.

**Yerba Mansa:** small green plants with red stems and red runners; found on the shores of the South Lake and stream banks; they have small white daisy-form flowers with tall centers.

**Purple Sage:** large mounds of aromatic gray-green foliage topped with lavender flower spikes; found along the quarter-mile trail, native plant areas of the one-mile trail, and in the Cantrell Garden at the north shore of the South Lake.

Photographs of these and other beautiful flowers found at the Nature Center are in a notebook in the museum. Learning about these plants can make your trips through the Center more enriching and enjoyable.

# Wonders of the Wetland

As spring approaches, we look back on another great season of educational programs at Colorado Lagoon Wetland and Marine Science Education Center. For the third consecutive year, naturalists from El Dorado Nature Center facilitated a six-month long wetland education program for Rogers Middle School. More than 150 6th graders visited the lagoon every month to learn about the important functions wetlands serve within the watershed. By coming monthly from the fall through the spring, students developed a relationship with the lagoon and became aware of seasonal changes with plants and wildlife. We hope this foundation of understanding will inspire a new generation of stewards for Colorado Lagoon.

Late spring is also the time of year when the birds wintering at the wetland get the itch to head back north to their breeding grounds. Their departure coincides with the arrival of spring and summer residents like Forester's and Least Terns, Marbled Godwits, Great Blue Herons, as

well as Mallards and Snowy Egrets. On any given day, you may catch a glimpse of young terns learning how to plunge-dive for fish or juvenile herons perfecting the art of stalking prey in the shallows along the shore. The next time you head to the lagoon, make sure to bring a pair of binoculars and a bird guide to help you enjoy all there is to see.



**Forester's Tern.**

The birds are always an amazing attraction at the Lagoon, but you should

also take the time to look at the incredible variety of life below the water's surface. One of the invaluable functions of a wetland is that of a nursery for marine life. The calm waters, lush vegetation, and rich food sources make wetlands like Colorado Lagoon ideal for breeding and raising young. Spring at the lagoon is the time of year when you may see round stingrays, moon jellies, sea slugs, and fish in greater numbers. Each species may be looking for a mate, defending a territory, or laying eggs.

Keep your eyes peeled for long, yellow, spaghetti-like strands in the shallows of the lagoon. These are groups of eggs laid by the California Brown Sea Hare, an animal that may attain lengths of 16 inches and a weight of nearly 15 pounds. Who knew that eating a steady diet of red or brown seaweed would pack on the pounds?

Almost anywhere you look along the shore or off the bridge, you are bound to discover the abundant diversity Colorado Lagoon offers.

## GBBC - Counting for Fun and Future

House Finch, Mourning Dove, Scrub Jay, Black Phoebe – the names may not ring a bell, but probably you've seen one of them flitting through your garden or pecking at a feeder. These birds have become such a part of the daily fabric of our lives, that they generally go unnoticed.

Every year, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society pay tribute to these birds by sponsoring the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). This event helps ornithologists discover vital information about them such as changes in populations and migration patterns. Amateurs and experts alike count the birds they see and enter the data online. The information is then used to help protect birds in our backyards and beyond.

In February, the Nature Center hosted a GBBC event. There were bird walks, crafts, and informational displays available to visiting patrons. The most recent results show over 12 million individual birds were counted! In Long Beach alone, participants counted 73 different species. For more information visit [www.birdsource.org](http://www.birdsource.org).

## A Project for Sustainable Living: Compost Your Garbage

The United States creates millions of tons of food waste every year, which ends up in our local landfills. Biodegradable products do not break down in a landfill because the waste is covered with dirt, which deprives oxygen to the process of decomposition. This lack of oxygen creates an anaerobic environment and produces methane gas contributing to global warming.

Many communities all over the country have joined together to reduce their trash quantity by composting in their own backyards. In a typical garbage can, 24% of the waste is either yard clippings or food waste. Coffee filters, banana peels, egg cartons, paper, leaves, yard trimmings, egg shells, straw, sawdust, cardboard, hair, newspaper, teabags are all compostable products. Imagine not hav-

ing to haul out all those heavy trash cans each week!

In addition, composted material, after breaking down, can be used as soil amendment or mulch. So the food waste now going to a landfill could be used to improve your own plants, reduce water consumption and suppress weeds. Compost could be the best thing to ever happen to your garden.

So how can you get started?

The City of Long Beach offers composting workshops every month at the Environmental Services Bureau. Just call (562) 570-4694 for more information and a reservation. Also, you can buy a discounted composting bin through the City of Long Beach, by visiting [www.longbeach-recycles.org](http://www.longbeach-recycles.org).

*Happy Composting!*

